I KNOW YOU

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TC 660H
Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin

May 2, 2019

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ABSTRACT

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"I Know You" is a collection of short stories about growing up that is populated by and meant for adults or near-adults. It deals with the beauty that comes from observing and asking questions, urgently and of everything including yourself, but has much more to do with the pain of losing innocence. To trace the full extent of that pain, each of my stories evoke some significant delights of childhood: in "A Box in Manhattan" it is a surety about people, in "I Know You" it is a glittering fantasy about perfect love, in "Fragile Things Outside the Treehouse" it is a feeling of safety. The characters are at different stages of life—early high school, senior in college, early thirties—but they are all stubborn women who deny until the last possible moment that those significant childhood delights cannot survive in the world as they have come to know it.

Acknowledgments

To the Plan II Honors Program—thank you for giving me a home at such a large university and for introducing me to teachers who've made me smarter and reminded me how little I know. This program has humbled and excited me so many times. I've loved it.

To my supervisor, Professor Cásares, I don't know what these stories would look like without you. And I prefer not to think about it. Thank you for taking a chance on me. Thank you for your guidance and patience while I tried to figure out these pieces —and talked in circles during your office hours. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be edited by such a great storyteller, on and off the page. Your work has arrested and moved me so many times. Thank you for every bit of your time.

To my second reader, Dr. Reeves, I don't think I would be writing creatively without your poetry class last year. I fell in love with writing all over again because of you. You inspire vulnerability from students, and I'm lucky to have learned from you. In short, I think you're brilliant. Thank you for taking me seriously.

To all the other teachers I've adored — Professor Bertelsen, Professor Frazier, Professor Coffin, Professor Valentine, Professor Christian, Professor Siddiqui, Professor Rabinowitz, Professor Ives, Professor Kornhaber, Professor Rumrich, Professor Ruiz-Camacho, Professor Heinzelman, Professor McCracken, to name a few — thank you for generously rewarding your students for each minute of their attention. You've made me a better writer, given me challenging material that's changed the way I think, and taught me to value my ideas and my questions highly.

To Virginia, thank you for being the first person in my life that I felt comfortable sharing these with. I owe you so much for your support and for making such gorgeous art for these stories. I've never had someone give me a gift I've treasured more. You and your art and your crazy-large heart inspire me.

To Sarah, thank you for talking me through these pieces and for making me laugh when I took life and senior year too seriously. You've got a gale-force will, and I know you'll thrive in France—even though I maintain the French don't deserve you. Also, I'll miss you like crazy.

To Ida, you did the most to support me whenever I felt low or scared during this process. Thank you for encouraging me when I needed it most. Your confidence and strength are awe-inspiring. You're the best roommate I've ever had and a part of my family.

To Barbara, you've taught me to be a creative person. You gave me the encouragement I needed to value and love writing more than I feared failing. You're a true artist. I hope to be as brave and as self-possessed as you are.

To Mimi, you're the most caring person I know, and your texts and calls kept me sane. I'm happy and at peace every time I see you.

To Anna, I'm lucky to have you as my sister. Your belief in me and support mean so much more than you know. I adore you.

To Jason, you're one of the brightest spots in my whole life. Hanging out with you inspires me endlessly.

To my parents, I owe you the whole world and the moon and just about everything else. Thank you for working to give me the education you did. Thank you for telling me that you believe in me. You made every good thing in my life possible. I love you.

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Creative Treatise

My little brother Jason is nine now. I drove him home from school recently and asked him what he's most looking forward to about being an adult.

He replied, "I'm excited to boss kids around. Like you do."

"Ah. Like I do, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, I want the POWER," Jason said in a monster voice. But he was serious.

"You think I have power?" I asked.

"Yep."

I fought the urge to turn around and tell my brother "Oh, really it's not that much power," but I didn't want to burst his bubble. And I didn't know if he'd fully believe me.

What I feel it would be very difficult to tell my brother is that, in my experience, growing up has felt a lot more like slipping than climbing onwards and upwards. More power has come with greater anxiety about powerlessness, of how limp and limited your options are to control yourself or others—to get things into the kind of order you originally imagined. And more knowledge has come with more and bigger questions.

This collection of short stories is about growing up, and the stories are centered on and meant for adults or near-adults. It deals a bit with the beauty that comes from observing and asking questions, urgently and of everything including yourself, but much more to do with how the characters in my stories attempt to handle or cope with the pain of losing innocence.

To trace the full extent of that pain, I wanted to recreate the significant delights of childhood innocence: in "A Box in Manhattan" it is a surety about people, in "I Know You" it is a glittering fantasy about perfect love, in "Fragile Things Outside the Treehouse" it is a feeling of safety. My main characters are at different stages of life—early high school, senior in college, early thirties—but they are all stubborn women who deny until the last possible moment that those significant childhood delights cannot survive in the world as they have come to know it, and they must reckon with the grief of trying to return to a place where they felt very comfortable only to find they no longer fit through the door.

When I started this collection, I spent ample worrying about what I wanted to say with these stories. I found one Stuart Dybek quote on craft invaluable because he reframed storytelling as story-making: "When I first started writing I thought it would be about saying something. I don't think that now. I think of writing as making something." This freed me to think that I did not have to have answers or affect to have them. I could simply focus my energy on giving narrative form to the questions that fascinate me, and, if I gave them enough definition, my uncertainty could add something to the larger collection of human confusion. The core questions in these stories are questions that I've asked myself repeatedly as I've grown up—and still don't fully have answers to—some of which include: "Do 'I know you' and 'I love you' mean the same thing?" "What happened to true love?" and "How do you love fragile things?"

Here, I'll describe some formal choices I've made to shape these questions into stories—explore narrative structure, point of view, language. Overall, I hope I've shaped the stories into places where the questions and those interested in them can feel at home.

I also intend to name and honor some of the writers and thinkers who've influenced me. —lent me ideas, structures, words, images. I feel I would be remiss if I did not discuss some of the work that helped me think more clearly and gave me the tools to make my stories.

I. Craft of "A Box in Manhattan"

"A Box in Manhattan" is about Allen and Addison Cobb, an introverted father and daughter struggling to figure out how to communicate and love each other. The narrator, Addison, is a sophomore in high school with a love for botany and a large curiosity. She sets out to know more about both her father and her deceased grandmother when she flies to Manhattan for her grandmother's funeral. When Addison finds a box containing her grandmother's biggest secrets—an archive of letters to a woman named Andrea—she and her father, a reporter for *The New York Times* have very different ideas about what should be done with them. It becomes an argument about what to do with other people's secrets and whether or not it's possible to love people without really knowing them.

Q: Do 'I know you' and 'I love you' mean the same thing?

I was fascinated by this question because, before last summer, I felt so strongly that if 'I know you' and 'I love you' weren't exactly equivalent statements they were only off by a matter of degrees. There was, to me, a clear direct relationship between how much you knew someone

and how much you loved them: the more you pay attention, the more you understand the logic behind how a person thinks and acts, the closer you are. But then I learned, in a short amount of time, about significant pains that people in my family had struggled with throughout my life, but that I had missed for twenty-one years. I began to mistrust the emotional intelligence I always thought I had, and it put all my conceptions of people at a bit of a wobble.

In short, I was fascinated by the question because how little I knew about the people I loved was beginning to scare me. Getting to know the people you consider family seemed to me to be one of the highest charges for spending the given time, and I was struggling to figure out if that still held true.

I found a Zadie Smith essay collection, *Changing My Mind*, which turned the lights on for me and gave me the much needed critical company whose ideas helped me think in earnest about how to create the dialogue and conflict necessary for a story about two different, valid responses to the same question.

In Smith's collection, "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov" was the most influential. It's a brilliant—and at times remarkably funny—critical essay on two different philosophies on how well you can know a novel or get to its original meaning that I applied to my obsession with whether people could be known. This didn't seem a large leap to me. If the novel is not an operational vehicle for individual meaning—even though the best ones are created by the most talented communicators operating at the height of their personal control—then there did not seem to be much hope for the average individual who wants to know or be known.

Roland Barthes' thesis in his 1967 essay "Death of the Author" had those kinds of dire implications; he pronounced "the Author" dead, and he argued that the pursuit of the text's

ultimate meaning—which he also called its "secret"—was an impossible one doomed to fail. You could disentangle language but not get to the bottom of it: "The space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced" (Barthes qtd. by Smith, 42; 45). But Nabokov's philosophy was slightly more cheering, there was no hope to pierce, to really get to the "secret," but effort and attention get you closer by degrees to a fixed reality. Nabokov wrote:

> Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information, and as specialization. If we take a lily for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing, but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. (qtd. by Smith)

Barthes was saying, in essence, you can't know someone, or, as Smith put it "There is no *there* there" (Smith, 57). But, to Nabokov's mind, there is a *there* there, and even if you can never get to it, you can certainly know more or less. Nabokov's line is the one I clung and still cling to.

And Nabokov's hypothesis that you approach reality through increasing levels of attention and mastery perhaps most informed the central pursuit of "A Box in Manhattan." Addison, the main character, attempts to get to the essence of people in her family via a "gradual accumulation of information," by forming and then working to lengthen the list of things she knows about both her deceased grandmother Marianne and her father Allen. Structurally, it was crucial for me to begin with the list and for the plot to proceed in such a way that Addison adds to the list of things she knows about both her father and her grandmother by the end; that pursuit is a through line, because, on a motivational level, Addison's need to know is constant.

Though Addison's motive remains essentially the same, her idea about how closely knowing and loving someone are tied fluctuates. I made this story a kind of mirror narrative—where Addison is tested with the same conflicts that appear twice but with slightly different faces and very different implications. Her quests to lengthen her lists of "Things I Know about Marianne" and "Things I Know about Allen" point to separate conclusions on the central question: with Marianne that loving and knowing are tied and with Allen that they have almost nothing to do with each other.

A few events and images mark the turning points that pivot Addison's thinking. In the first part of this story, Addison thinks she didn't love her grandmother because she never got to know her, but when Addison sees another dad with a smaller girl at the airport, she's reminded of how much she loved her father as a little girl even though she knew almost nothing about him. The letters are the second cue for a switch back to the original way of thinking. Addison is so awed and elated to discover one of Marianne's secrets that she feels more strongly that if she'd known Marianne's secret while her grandma was alive she could have loved her. And the pleasure of being rewarded with a bit of beauty and interest about her grandmother makes her desire for the same reward with her father more acute. This mindset persists for almost the entire rest of the piece and becomes more painful as Addison argues with her father. Her interactions with Allen prove how little he knows about her—which makes Addison fear he couldn't possibly love her. The path to a kind of peace about that fear and confusion is a conversation with her father in which he offers a philosophy about knowing and loving that is antithetical to the one Addison holds. And Addison listens and understands it even if she doesn't fully buy in, even though the desire to get to the secrets is still there. It's a quiet scene, but, to my mind, also the most crucial one of the piece.

To write this scene, I needed the help of a variety of writers. To be a fitting antagonist to Addison, Allen needed the most empathetic argument against conflating 'I know you' and 'I love you'—taking a quest to know others too far. I picked up that argument in different forms throughout the year from the philosopher Jacques Derrida, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and Vladimir Nabokov. I note them here, not least because I think they're quite beautiful. Derrida wrote, "If a right to a secret is not maintained we are in a total totalitarian space" (qtd. in Smith). The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other." And Nabokov wrote in *Pnin*, "Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?"

To other formal choices, I thought a story partially about the difficulty of knowing people needed to be first person. In third person omnipotent fiction, you purport to know everyone's secrets, and even in third person close you know the main character's. Third person is one of the greatest pleasures to read and write for that reason: you get to know or imagine what everyone is up to. But capturing the frustration of forming real connections felt much truer in first. Also, I wanted the first-person narrator, Addison, to be at a place in psychological development where she would naturally be forming increasingly complex views of her parents. Addison also needed to be a voice for which the desire to know and the difficulty of communication were both heightened. So, Addison emerged as an aspiring scientist with ample curiosity and observational skills but below average social skills. To try to capture the mind of a scientist who eats with her botanist-enthused biology teacher every day, I read both Michael Pollan's astonishing long-form on plant intelligence and Richard Mabey's essays in *The Cabaret of Plants*, where all the information about Addison's sundew plant came from.

The most consequential language choice I made in this story was to blemish the dialogue as much as I could without it becoming too impossible to read. I wanted to trace the limitations of verbal communication, the principal instrument we use to learn about each other. There are a number of pauses, stutters, restarts, and wiggle words—the "uh," "you know," "like," "um" words that people use to fill the air while thinking. Addison says, "Ok-, well— that's good then?" when she's trying to think of something else to ask her father about work. Other times the pauses are meant to say something about characters' central emotion and drive, such as when Allen says of his mother, "but she didn't want me to see her so differently, so— without the usual faculties;" He's a man who wanted to respect his mom's wish for privacy, so I hope the dash in the middle of that sentence communicates continued care for the way his mother and her illness are presented. He's much more willing to look vulnerable and take time to search for what he sees as the right words than sound slick but say something about his mother that is imprecise, cruel, or should have gone unsaid. I owe my appreciation for the imperfections of language to hours of interview transcriptions during journalism internships, where I had ample practice noting each pause and stutter and was amazed, continually, at how much of what we say is simply noise—dumb or emotional— without the force of idea.

II.Craft of "I Know You"

"I Know You" is a story about how a New Year's Eve party in the wealthiest suburb of D.C. makes a nanny named Alison question if her dream for romance can survive in the adult world as she's come to know it. Alison comes to babysit Edith Bosch, an eight-year-old who wants to

grow up fast and get her first kiss from a boy named Daniel at midnight. But Alison begins to wonder, as she watches both adults and kids play complicated games with each other, if she should let this little girl—or herself—keep hoping for something as selfless as true love.

Q: What happened to true love?

This question sprang partially from the concerns of "A Box In Manhattan," from an idea that true love is a place where loving and knowing are exactly equivalent, where "I love you, baby" equals "I know you, baby," where every thought and emotion is easily understood by the person you're with.

This question also seemed urgent to me because of personal experience. Even after the nicest first kiss, first date, first sex with anyone there remained the concern, "Yes, that was all very nice but where is *he*? Where is *it*?" *He* being charming—the man that will clear away feelings of loneliness. *It* being true love.

A number of writers and thinkers helped me think about the reasons true love becomes untenable, but I began to write a story about it after an essay of Joan Didion's on John Wayne convinced me that other women have not only asked the question but demonstrated that the ache for the kind of romance you conceived of as a child can be captured so movingly. Joan Didion wrote of the first time she saw John Wayne movies as a young girl, on a hot summer when she grew bored of watching artificial rain in the Officer's Club:

> It was there, that summer of 1943 while the hot wind blew outside, that I first saw John Wayne. Saw the walk, heard the voice. Heard John Wayne tell the girl in a picture called *War of the Wildcats* that he would build her a house, 'at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow.

Wayne was Didion's *he.* And, after years of meeting men who "have never been John Wayne" or told her that they'll build her that house where the cottonwoods grow, Didion concludes, "Deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls, that is still the line I wait to hear."

I thought, when I first read it, "That's a story." And I continue to think it is. I feel like a lot of little girls have that man or that movie scene that makes them believe in a kind of romance that doesn't exist, and I wanted to capture the ache of waiting for him and the feeling of loss when you realize you won't ever have quite that—quite John Wayne

When I was thinking of building a story around the question of "What happened to true love?" I knew I wanted a piece about dreams to be a bit dreamlike in structure. More specifically, I wanted it to feel like a dream going slowly sour for Alison, and I chose three dreamlike, or fairytale-esque, images to serve as anchor points to mark and advance Alison's psychological story. The first is the visual of Aurora and Prince Phillip dancing in *Sleeping Beauty*, which is situated toward the open of the story and establishes that this childhood idea of "true love" means a great deal to Alison. That's the dream. The second anchor point comes quickly after the first: Alison looks in the mirror and realizes she has a "mirror-face"— she changes the look of her features unconsciously when she looks at herself to make them more seductive, more in-line with women she's seen in movies or catalogs. After this point, Alison begins to pay a lot more attention to try to answer the question: If the way I look at my own face has changed this much since I was a girl, how much else has changed? Throughout the story, as she watches other people and herself more critically, she begins to see that the human ego imperils the possibility of the selfless love she dreamed of. In its place, she finds that she and others have viewed love more as a game with winners and losers. She sees it when she lays out

rules to Edith when they're talking about her kiss, when Mr. Bosch gifts her expensive wine, when she notes her own satisfaction at hearing her boyfriend say, "I miss you." Slowly, she realizes that the idea of love as a game is an insidious one, and that people, herself included, seem increasingly powerless to stop thinking about it in those terms or to stop desiring emotional power over others. At anchor point three, when Alison sees the Boy Scout and Daniel hanging Edith's Barbie Doll off a bridge, Addison has the full revelation that the dream she had as a kid— of the waltz and the song—can't survive. The revelation comes not only because this doll, so closely tied with Edith's hopes for romance, is dramatically subverted and stripped, but because she's able to comprehend that the dream of being a hero with a cause that the Boy Scout is acting out won't ever be anything more than pretend. She's realized that what she's observed about other people and herself over the course of the night make that boy's dream impossible; he isn't pure enough for it and neither is the world. It's a short step— and one quick phone call to her boyfriend—to crystallize the realization that her own dream of being fully known by a man is one that requires a level of innocence and selflessness that she no longer views as possible.

A close third person seemed the best choice for this story, not only because it removes a sense of Alison's agency but because it allowed me the freedom to play with elevated language that a first-person narration would not. Of any of the three stories, this one is most suffused with descriptive or romantic language because I wanted to make the sensory details relevant, noticeable actors in this story. One illustration:

> The bare feet on the chilled grass; the way the light reached shyly around the trees; how Beauty spun, when he twirled her, like a dandelion seed on warm wind; the full whine of strings while they walked to a low bough; the way he sang, "I know you, I walked with you once": Alison thought this was what should be expected of love.

To make readers care about what happened to this "true love," I knew the language capturing what that looked like for Alison—that "I Know You" dance scene—had to be sufficiently sensuous. Described dryly, from the perspective of an adult, the description of the scene would read something like, "A strange man spies on Aurora while she's alone in the woods, thinks she's hot, overhears what she's singing, and repeats it back to her until she agrees to dance with him." This is not an inaccurate portrayal of that scene, but the feeling evoked for a little girl is so different. I wanted to capture the magic of watching that scene at such a young age in as few sentences as possible. To do this, I borrowed a sentence structure from Michael Parker's "Muddy Water, Turn to Wine," which had all the romance I wanted and then some:

> The walk from the bar to her garage apartment through the charged quiet of the dark neighborhood streets, the way she laid him down on a tightly made bed while she went about lighting a half-dozen windowsill candles, the sound of the vinyl slipped from its sleeve and soon after of the arm falling, the needle scratching, the first bass-heavy notes of an album from James's youth: James thought maybe he might be in love.

I love that Parker disorients you, bathes you in the details, before he tells you why you're there. And I love the overall idea that the feeling of love can be explained as the end result of an accumulation of pleasurable sensory signals. I wanted it to feel inevitable that Alison would fall in love with the idea of "true love" presented on screen and that she did so without thinking about it. She simply received the sensory signals and was spellbound—hooked. When Alison grows up, the sensory details she's describing that influence her are also more grown up. They skew much more to the sexual sensory details Parker describes—for example, her boyfriend's hand on her thigh which made her whole-body temperature seem to change. My hope was that

the descriptive language was not only pleasurable to read but that it drew attention to the external signals that drove Alison's romantic desires as a child and as an adult.

Also, I thought it was fitting to make the central character of this story a nanny because that gave her a simultaneous intimacy and detachment from the people she describes; essentially, she's perfectly positioned to have a critical eye. That vocation stood out to me after I read Antonya Nelson's "Naked Ladies," a story about a nanny and her family visiting her employer's house on Easter. Nelson's story was thematically interested in similar things—questions about innocent love and where it's gone off to—but it also proved to me what a delight it can be to read a story in which the main character undergoes a large change simply by watching carefully and analyzing other people.

III. Craft of "Fragile Things Outside the Treehouse"

In "Fragile Things Outside the Treehouse," a thirty-year-old woman named Ana Pinch takes her best socks and a large bottle of tequila and moves back into her childhood treehouse when her mom is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Ana is a flight attendant who has found the only way to enjoy Paris is to never admit she's leaving it, and the only way to love her mother is to never admit that she has any pain Ana can't help. Avoiding her problems to feel safer in a place suffused with memories of her childhood works for Ana—until a vulture shows up and things get weirder and much more difficult.

Q: How do you love fragile things?

This question seemed the hardest to contain in a realistic story— and remains the most urgent to me. In my other stories, I explored how it's hard to know people and it's hard to love people, but I feel it's even harder to know people you love are in pain. "How much do I care about this person? How much do I owe this person?" are two questions Ana asks in the story that I also go back to. I've found that if I look at someone, ask either question, and the magnitude of answer scares me then I know I really love that person. And my brother Jason's idea that one of the best things about adulthood is the power—or "POWER"—seems most off-the-mark to me when people I really love experience pain I can't ameliorate.

With this story, I find influences and works that I am in conversation with the hardest to pin down because I think almost every writer and poet has written stories about what it means to love things that end and people that die. But I do think, overall, Joy Williams' work and words had the most impact on the story. In Williams' "Hawk," a work of terrible beauty about a woman who tries to communicate the grief of having her beloved dog put down after he attacks her without preamble, she left a piece of wisdom that helped me think that a story about pain needed a surreal shape: "When one is experiencing emotional pain or grief, one feels that everything that happens in life is unreal. And that is the right understanding of life."

Also, though a few story elements were personal previous obsessions that found a place to live on the page, the vulture is by far the oddest of them. And I felt Williams gave me permission to use it. Since I chose to report on vultures in third grade, I've felt an affection for them; they might be ostensibly gruesome looking, but I think it is also amazing that they live off the dead. But I was afraid to use the vulture in a story because I felt the bird has been used too often in cartoons as a symbol of death to feel new. But in Joy Williams' list "Eight Essential Attributes of the Short Story," which I've had pinned to my computer screen for the year, her

number four essential attribute of a short story is: “An animal within to give its blessing.” I thought if anyone protests the vulture I could say Williams made me do it. Also, thinking about what kind of blessing or gift a vulture could give helped generate this story.

When I thought about structure, I knew that this had to be a tighter story than the other two because it was driven by emotion and images more than the plot, and I had ambitions to lend it the concision and punch of poetry that is similarly driven. It has turned into a story of essentially three parts, made to mirror Ana’s psychological response to the problems and pain that her mother dying of cancer presents. In the first part, I wanted to present the facts of the case: Ana’s mother Sarah has three to five months left. Ana is really the only one there to care for her. In the second part of the story, I wanted to delve in Ana’s coping mechanism, which was to reach back—both mentally and literally— toward a place in childhood where she felt safe. The treehouse portion of the story was, like the *Sleeping Beauty* scene in “I Know You,” the most essential to get right. I realized abandoning her dying mother is a greatly unsympathetic action on Ana’s part and, though it isn’t important to me she be liked, I wanted her decision to be at least partially understood. The scene in which Ana remembers her classmate’s broken pinkie was an anchor point in the story because it marks when Ana began to understand and fear how fragile the human body is. And it traces the extent of what Ana feels she owes her mother for giving her a powerful feeling of safety even when things felt dire. When the vulture comes to eat a dead warbler, he brings the same message as that broken pinkie but with a different, less ignorable face. The appearance of the vulture marks the third section of the story which thoroughly troubles Ana’s efforts to feel like the people and places she loves are not as delicate as they are—and it gets her to grow up a bit. I wanted the vulture to be a reminder that Ana really needs because she can't get back in the house on her own.

I chose third person limited perspective, as with the last story, because it allowed me greater opportunity to play with language than the first person. It also freed me to point out thoughts inside Ana's head that would read as odd or incredibly unsympathetic admissions in the first person. On micro-choices of sentence structure and word choice, I thought the occasional shot of an off-beat word or phrase would make a darker story more palatable. Also, I hoped the absurd mix of lighter, seemingly innocuous images with weightier ones added to the sense of the surreal or "unreality" that Williams talked about and exemplified. In Williams' "Chicken Hill"—a story about an old woman close to death who has odd, anagogical conversations with a second-grader—her first sentences do so much of the work to make the reader believe in all the absurd events that come later.

> She didn't know what had possessed her to participate in such a thing. A little boy had been run over by a sheriff's deputy, and there was a memorial fund-raiser at the Barbed Wire, a biker bar in a somewhat alarming part of town, and Ruth had gone and bought a beer and put thirty dollars into an empty terrarium, for funeral expenses. The place was loud and crowded, and she was given a plate with a tamale on it.

That paragraph announces some serious events. A little boy died. But the plate with a single tamale on it seems to be one of the most crucial elements of it—necessary precisely because it's so banal. It's simple to picture, funny, and vivid. I think, when I read it, "I've seen that. I buy it." Then it becomes impossible not to buy the rest of it. It would be so much easier for me not to believe in the boy's death when Williams' asks me to because she's asking quite a bit. She's asking me to add another person to the list of those I should care about. But that tamale asks nothing of me to picture, and it opens me to the story. If Williams' makes the plate with the tamale on it feel real then the little dead boy seems real, and, later, the disconcerting little girl who becomes a deadly, divine messenger feels real too.

In my story, after the vulture arrives and begins to eat the body of the warbler, Ana throws things at it: “crayons, her balled socks, and finally the tequila.” I hoped that visually placing elements the reader would be comfortable with next to the ones that seem unreal would establish that something like the vulture could not be wholly dismissed as a dream or an imaginative conjuring.

A Box in Manhattan

When I found out my grandmother Marianne Cobb died, I didn't cry. But I took it as a personal failure that I was never able to get to know her well enough to love her. She had Alzheimer's for about four years, so it had been expected. She was my dad's mom, and I visited her the handful of times I went to see him in the city after my parents got divorced. I could count on my hands the things I knew about her. #1. She preferred to go by Marianne instead of Grandma, Nana, Mar-Mar of any of those other things. #2. She wore her hair in a bun so tight it pulled back the skin on her forehead. #3. She was super tall for an old woman, almost six feet tall. That's a typical Cobb height. I'm the tallest girl in tenth grade, which isn't great. Once Mom made me wear heels to homecoming and Cole McPherson said to Grant Borgman when I passed them, "Who'd want to climb her tree?" #4. She was a professor at NYU. #5. She studied people professionally in Peru. There was probably so much more to know, but she was quiet and never took me out for ice-cream like Grandma Mimi did, so I didn't pay attention.

With my dad, Allen Cobb, I'm not much better. When people at school ask me about my dad I just say the same series of things. #1. His name is Allen. #2. Residence: NY, NY. #3. Personality: He's nice, smart. #4. Occupation: metro reporter for *The New York Times.* I know lots of other small things, but I never know what else I'm supposed to say, and most people tend to be comfortable with four bits of information to construct a person.

It's always frustrated me though, that I never feel like I'm getting quite to it. I'm just going off too little to be sure that I'm getting my dad right.

If Mrs. V, my AP Bio teacher, has taught me anything, it's that everything is more interesting than you first give it credit for. She's a botanist, mainly, and she likes to advocate for plants: "They might be quiet and slow moving, but they're so much more intelligent, more

dangerous too than people think." A few weeks ago, she gave me this carnivorous sundew plant with spines that are watermelon pink topped with wobbly beads of sticky liquid. Flies think they're landing on dew until they stick to the beads and get a slow smothering instead. I've seen it. Over a period of one to five hours the sundew leaf curls around the fly, seals it, and digests it. The fly has more than enough time to consider its mistake, to think, "I thought it looked so normal."

I know people are more difficult subjects. With a plant, you can watch them forever and they'll never get self-conscious, and if that doesn't work you just unzip them with a little razor to know all the things you want to know. But you can't do that with people. You've got to try to ask questions, use words instead, which sucks because I'm no good with them most of the time. I find it difficult to arrange the sentences in my head when people are looking at me. Actually, that's probably a Cobb trait, too. Dad and I's phone conversations are always same-samey, less than fifteen minutes. And I wish I looked forward to them more.

Before I board a plane to Manhattan to be with my dad for Marianne's funeral, my mom hugs me goodbye at the airport, and she squeezes the words into my back: "Be nice, okay?"

I don't think I've ever been mean to my dad, but it's possible I've hurt his feelings. A few times I visited him in the city after my parents' divorce, and I called Mom to leave earlier than I planned—one time one whole week earlier. I told Mom I hated Manhattan, that it had too many rats and too many people, that I missed San Diego, that I missed the clean way San Diego smelled. But the real problem was I needed my mom. Dad and I both needed her. Especially after he moved out, mom has been a bit like our interpreter, and she fills the silences in conversation. After that Manhattan trip, my dad mostly flew into San Diego for visits.

"Your dad will be grateful, sweetie. I think he needs you right now," she says. I don't know about that. My dad sounded the same as he always does when he called to plan logistics: what gate, what time. But my mom knows people so much better than me. She's a therapist, mostly for girls with depression or eating disorders, and she makes friends with everyone—baggers at our grocery store, flight attendants, old-ladies at the library, policemen pulling her over for speeding.

This time we'll have to do it without her. Two Cobbs all on their own. Mom has appointments with clients this Friday who really need her. I think, not for the first time, how jealous I am that she's the kind of person who makes people comfortable enough that they tell her all their secrets.

"I love you," Mom says before I go through security. She went swimming this morning so her blonde hair is curlier than usual, but her smile is the same as it always is, open and sure. I remind myself that I have some of her in me too, a people person buried in their somewhere that I just need to dig up. I try to mimic her smile back to her. Even though it feels too wide for my face, I hold it until I get to the TSA officer.

On the plane, I switch from the aisle to a middle seat when a large man in a Giants hat asks if he can be next to his daughter, who is sniffling into a bag of pretzels. The little girl has braces with yellow rubber bands and a blue shirt that says, "Soccer Star."

The middle seat is difficult on my legs. Midway through the flight, they start to cramp. When I turn to look longingly at my old seat, I see the daughter looks much happier next to her dad. He reads a magazine and occasionally helps her match the colored bubbles on her iPad game. She's not sniffling anymore.

By the time I get off the plane, my dad is standing in front of the baggage carousel. He's examining some airport map with his rectangular glasses slid partially down his nose. We both say "hello" at the same time, before I say, "I'm sorry you were waiting for me, and I'm sorry about Marianne. Are you–." I remember yes or no questions aren't the best. "How are you?"

"Oh, thank you, Addison. And I'm fine. We knew it was coming for a bit." He looks off to the side when he answers like he's trying to find one of his words hiding in the corner.

While we wait for my bags my dad says, "How is school going?" It's the same question he asks first every time he calls between visits.

"Good," I say.

"Good," he says. "It's good that school is going good."

Now I'm meant to ask, "How's work?" So, I do.

I know writing about transportation for *The New York Times* is a big deal, but when I read the articles he talks to me about on the phone, I get stuck on every word, stuck like bare feet in deeply boring mud. Every step is effort: "delay" "service" "metro" "terminal" "nexus" "track" "strike" "line."

"It's going fine," he says now. "Nothing too different."

"Ok-, well— that's good then?

"Yeah, it's good."

"Good."

I try to think of something else to ask, but nothing comes, so we just listen to the sound of the bags tumbling onto the conveyor belt.

The "Soccer Star" girl and her dad wait across from us. She balances on his tennis shoes and looks up at him while he holds her fingers. I was probably her age when I last treated my dad

like a home base to run to when I was afraid of strangers. If someone asked me a question I didn't want to answer, I'd go behind his legs or sit next to him and run my fingers up and down the tops of his knuckles. He also read to me at night because I demanded it. He had a better, more soothing reading voice than Mom's, and I liked how serious his face looked even when he was reading something about a lonely beagle or a pair of tortoises in love.

I think I was nine or so when I started to wonder about how he thought and what he thought about. But when I started asking him questions about himself, I realized my dad didn't like to answer them. The day they told me about the divorce my Mom did all the talking while my dad looked at his hands crossed over his knee. And that night when he read to me, I asked him why, and he didn't explain. He said, "I'd just like to read to you if that's okay?" And he's felt and less and less familiar over the years, even though I know a few more things about him than I did when I was that age.

I look at my dad now and wonder how he ever made me feel so secure, even when I knew so much less about him. That little girl is lucky; she doesn't know that she doesn't know the half of it.

***

Marianne's funeral is outside, and it's spring in Manhattan—humid. My dress sticks to my back. My dad keeps Marianne's eulogy under eight minutes, and he talks mainly about his mom's professional life. He reads: "Marianne Cobb started modestly. Grandpa Don Cobb was a soybean farmer in Iowa. She was the only woman in her high school to go to college, and she did so on scholarship. She ended her career as the venerated Chair of the Anthropology Department at NYU. An admirable rise, my mother's." By the end, the sweat stains on his dress shirt had

reached his elbows. My dad's father, my grandfather, had never been in the picture. This is one thing I learned since I was nine. My mom told me his dad was also an NYU professor, much older than Marianne, who fell in love with another woman in their apartment building one floor down and moved away to Morocco with her when my dad was eight.

The wake is held in Marianne's apartment, which is small even for New York. But it isn't too much of a squeeze because there are only nine people there, including my dad and me.

I pick at a quiche until Miss Simms, Marianne's next-door neighbor, approaches us. Stacks of silver bracelets clink on her wrist as she reaches to put her hand on my dad's shoulder, looking up at him over her round purple glasses.

"Oh, Allen." She frowns. "I'm sure you know Mari and I were neighbors toward the end. Your mother was quite a woman. I want you to know she's watching over you."

"Well, that's kin—," my dad starts to say.

"No." She makes a –tsk sound. "I know. I was baking orange scones this morning and a squirrel sat outside my window for twenty minutes, stock-still, watching me make them. It had your mother's eyes."

My father looks at Marianne's rug, nodding slightly, so Miss Simms smiles at me instead, whispers, "I felt her with me," and shuffles to speak with Andrea, a woman with eyebrows like toothbrush bristles. Andrea was Marianne's at-home care nurse. She talked to me earlier. My dad hired her when Marianne's Alzheimer's became advanced.

"Well, I do hope she can remember where she put her nuts." My dad laughs to himself when he says it—a dirty laugh that sounds like a cough.

I'm amazed at how sure Miss Simms seemed saying that. I don't think I've ever sounded so sure about a statement in my whole life.

When another woman comes up to me to tell me what a great bridge player my grandmother was, I decide I can't take one more person telling me something about my grandmother I don't know.

I walk down the hallway to hide in Marianne's room and make a study of what she left.

Inside, I find she definitely wasn't a neat person. Nothing in her room is where it's supposed to be.

There's a Dr. Shoel's sandal on a lamp, a bath towel on the desk, books and more than 15 Mendici's Italian take-out menus on the floorboards, and a dried orchid on the windowsill with a hairbrush shoved in its blue pot.

I understand that Alzheimer's makes you forget the proper place for everything, but nothing in her room seemed like it ever really had a proper place.

There are so many yellowing paperbacks, so much dust, that the room smells of it—of old. I don't hate it, actually. It makes me feel a little like an archeologist or something.

Under the bed, there are more—maps and field notes from sites that spread out from the corners of her wooden bed.

And then there's a box, way to the left corner. It's velvet green with a blue beaded tassel, and it's much prettier than any of the other things in her room.

I pull it out, sit crisscross, and open it.

It's filled with letters.

"Dear Andrea," the left corners all say.

There's white paper and old brown paper. I flip through heavy, lopsided stacks. Some of them aren't finished. A lot of them have words hidden with loops of black ink that look like small storm clouds.

08/16/2010

Dear Andrea,

It's really been too many years since we last saw each other.

I hope you have been well. I heard about Bradley passing a few years ago, and I am sorry I didn't write to you then.

I did try to.

I would enjoy to see you again. Let me know if there is a good time I can make the trip there, perhaps.

Sincerely,

Marianne"

10/22/2003
Dearest Andrea,

I hope this letter finds you well.

I'm writing because I found one of those pictures you drew me when we were kids the other day. It was one of the adventures of Timothy the Toad. Poor Timothy. He never had an easy time of it.

I don't know if you remember drawing it, but it made me think of you.

Those summers are some of the fondest memories of my life.

I would love to see you again soon to talk over all the years we've missed.

Love,

Mari.

Then there are some with a slanted script and no smudges or cross-outs.

01/24/1995

Andrea,

I'm thinking about the last time we met at Drees. I remember you wore yellow, and you looked very pretty in it.

But we didn't talk like we used to. I hadn't seen you in so many years and we spent the whole time talking about Bradley's insurance at his new job, whether the girls from high school were married or divorced, and how expensive the produce is in the winter.

It was so painful for me to talk to you that way, about things like that. You were close to me, and I still missed you.

I miss the talks we used to have on the swing on your front porch.

When things happen that make me laugh or feel bad I still think about telling you before anyone else.

I think I've always loved you, Andrea.

-Mari.

I can't picture the Marianne I knew writing these.

She was such a vague sketch to me before, almost as vague as the girl in Mom's Elliott Erwitt print. It's one of the few expensive things in our house, and I pass it every time I walk to the kitchen. It's a black and white photo of a gala where the only face you can see is a young blond girl staring over the large suited shoulders of her dancing partner. The girl's face is so

balanced you can't tell if she's happy or not, if she's dreaming or bored out of her mind. "What could she be thinking?" Mom asks me sometimes. Mom seems happy not to know, to make up things. But it bothers me that my guess can be completely wrong or right and there's no way to tell.

I only feel less anxious around the print if I imagine the top of the girl's head as a snow-globe—glass all the way around that I can look through to see the thoughts slipping around in there, just watch them move.

But now I know what Marianne really spent so much of her time thinking about, wanting so badly. God, these are so honest.

It's thrilling.

Maybe Andrea would feel the same way. My grandma has five friends outside and none of them are Andrea. Wouldn't she have shown if she knew?

There are really so many. The pages are different sizes and stages of yellow.

The door creaks, and I start to shove the letters in the box.

"Addison, are you okay?" My dad says from the doorway.

"Yeah, just—um. I just wanted a second alone." My right hand is on the remaining stack.

His brows cinch together, and he walks toward me. He is so tall. He looks down at me with one of his hands out of his suit pockets.

"What did you find?"

I hand a stack of letters to him. He jingles his keys in his pockets as he reads the first one. It takes five seconds. He reads two more, stops to eye the stack, and reads another.

His hands stop moving, and he presses his stubble between his thumb and forefinger like he's trying to find something buried in his cheek.

"I'm sorry I shouldn't have."

He starts reading another.

"How many of them?" he asks, face down.

"A lot. Did you kn—"

"No. No, I didn't."

I don't know how long I sit there, watching him read. He sighs occasionally. "Wow," he whispers once.

The moment stretches and stretches. I wait for the snap that I know has to come. I want it to.

"I saw the squirrel!" Miss Simms opens the door with a percussive slap.

"Hurry, hurry! Or she'll go away," she says.

"Miss Simms," my dad says, dropping the letters on the desk.

"Come." She points her arms to the living room repeatedly like she's directing dogs.

We go and at the window, in the crown part of a pin-oak tree, there's a squirrel sitting on a branch with an acorn in its mouth, eyes at me and unblinking. There are thousands of acorns on the tree behind it, and I wonder how long it has been doing this, and where it is going to bury them.

It twitches. Still looking. Then runs off down the branch.

"She just wanted to see you again, and for you to see her." Miss Simms wraps her fingers, heavy with rings and veins, around my dad's arm.

"That was very nice of her. I will look forward to her continued supervision." My dad pushes his glasses up his nose with the arm Mrs. Simms is holding. "Thank you for everything, Miss Simms."

“Do you want me to go outside and try to call her in here?” Miss Simms squishes her wrinkled lips together like a fish and a sucking sound shoots between her teeth.

“No.” My dad looks weary, “Addison and I need to go home.”

“Okay, of course. One second.” Miss Simms goes into Grandma Marianne’s kitchen, pulls Saran wrap from a drawer by the sink, Tupperware from the cupboard just above. She didn’t have to guess where anything was.

Then Mrs. Simms sets to packing and wrapping. For a number of minutes, all we hear is her jewelry jangling as she does it.

When she finishes, my dad walks her to the door. She doesn’t have to go far. Maybe ten steps to her apartment: Apt. 203 with a print out of Botticelli’s Venus taped to her door.

“Are you ready to go? Need anything?” My dad stacks the casseroles and pies in plastic bags.

“There’s an orchid on the windowsill,” I say.

“You want the orchid?” he asks. “I never noticed it, but—have it. Probably from Peru. I’m sure she’d want you to.”

I take Marianne’s orchid but remove the hairbrush. The orchid is lovely and uncared for—yellow, striped like a tiger, and deeply hunched. Its edges are curled. I take three letters, too, and I have to dig through the stack my father left on the desk to find the last one I read. I fold them in squares under the flower pot.

In the living room, Dad is behind the kitchen counter with the bags next to him. “Looks like a nice one.”

I nod.

"Took a while," he says. He taps his knuckles on the counter a few times. "Look, I should have said I don't want you to take the letters."

"I—didn't."

I don't lie to him usually.

"Addison," he says. He's not convinced, and I have trouble looking at him.

I pull them from under the pot.

"Don't you think we should send them?" I ask.

"What?"

"I think, you know, maybe we should."

"I don't think so."

"Well- why?" I press my fingers into a piece of salt on the barstool.

"My mom never sent them."

"She put in so much effort. She wanted her to see them. She was probably just too—is it because she was in love with another—"

"I'm from New York, Addison. I don't care." He pauses, "It is weird for me. But I don't care. I just think she'd want us to leave it be."

I don't understand why he's pretending he knows what she wanted.

"But—"

"Could we drop this," my dad says, and after a moment, "Please."

I want to be done dropping things. I want him to finally have to explain. But I nod and say, "Fine."

Dad clears his throat and then asks me to tell him about a coding camp I have in the summer.

I tell him about it. The coding camp also teaches AI, and it's at MIT. It's the thing I've wanted for the past two summers.

"It sounds cool, Addison. And you're sure this is something you want to do? $4000 for two weeks is quite a bit."

"I can pay you back after college."

"Addison, That's not— I can pay for it. I don't want the money back. I just remember when you were really into piano, and you did all those private classes. And then you stopped, and I never heard about it again."

"So, I'm being punished because I hated piano?"

"You didn't hate it," Dad says.

"I did, though. Mom wanted me to try her instrument, but my teacher was the worst, and I—I wasn't good."

"Well, I don't remember you hating it," he says.

"My mistake, then, I guess I must have loved it."

"You're being flip." Dad's eyebrows scrunch in like he's trying to read something without his glasses.

"You don't know what I'm being," I say.

"Is this the fun teenage phase I've heard so much about?"

"You don't know me."

"That's dramatic."

"I don't think so. There's obviously a lot you don't know."

Dad's silent for a time. "That woman—"

"Andrea?" I say.

"—doesn't need to know all of this. People don't want a whole box of other people's feelings. What's she supposed to do about this now?" He looks at me and then puts his hands on either side of the kitchen island.

"Wouldn't you want to know if someone loved you that much?" I ask.

Those weren't the right words.

My dad looks so serious that my shoulders begin to shake.

"I refuse to embarrass my mother," he says.

I feel pressure at the root of my nose.

"Dad—"

He massages his forehead.

I won't cry in front of him. I take deep breaths.

"But Dad—"

"Look, you're a child sometimes," he says. "It's late. We should go."

He grabs the bags, walks to the door, and holds it open for me. After a second, I follow him. I watch the letters on the counter as he closes Marianne's door.

Dad walks just like any other New Yorker, quickly and with his head down. I have to jog to keep up with him as we go to the subway. Marianne's orchid is bobbing side to side in my arms.

In the subway cars, no one speaks. To the left, there's a couple sharing headphones. To the right, a businesswoman sighs as she lifts the heel of her foot an inch out of her shoes. Across from us, there's a dad and a daughter. The daughter is wearing a shirt with a cat holding a sparkly star.

My dad gave me a sweater like that last Christmas. It had a flamingo with a rhinestone bow on it. Mom laughed when I opened it and said, "He tries." A *child.* The Addison he has in his mind isn't me at all. He just kept an older version of me and hasn't updated it, hasn't even tried to. And he won't try to with Marianne either.

When we get home, I tell him I'm tired and go quickly to his room where my suitcase is and where I always stay when I'm here. When I sit down on the bed, I start to cry. My head feels like it has been filled with sand. I call Mom.

"Are you okay?" she asks gently.

"Dad doesn't love me," I say quietly because his apartment is so small—one bedroom and kitchen-living space. He is just on the couch.

"Addison, come on, of course he does."

"Mom, I mean it. How could he love me? He doesn't know me at all. And I don't know why you think he needs me. He doesn't seem like he knew his mom either, or like he's even really that upset about her."

"Honey, he just keeps a lot in store. I know it's hard sometimes, but he just—well, honestly, you two are similar."

"Mom, *please*."

"But really. The look you both get. I've had to ask both of you so many times, 'Where are you?' I used to go into your dad's office and have a full conversation with him. 'You're picking up Addison, today. I'll be late from work.' 'Yeah, sure. No problem,' and then he doesn't remember any of it. You too. You just both live—. You're interior people."

"But I at least try more than him," I say.

Mom asks me about the funeral, and I tell her about the heat and the bad quiches.

"I know your dad can be difficult, baby, but I do think he's hurting. From what I know, Marianne raised him by herself after his dad left. That was hard for him. I don't know if he ever got over that completely," she says.

I lay down when we get off the phone.

I do try more than him. I notice his walls are the color of brown eggs. No way dad knows what mine are painted.

I sit up and look in his closet to start adding more things to the list. He doesn't like clothes that much: He has five shirts, three pants, and two pairs of shoes.

He really likes books, like Marianne. There are shelves and shelves of books arranged by section. Lots of them are maps—of this city and its underground but also other cities and other countries. There are sociology textbooks, psychology textbooks, dictionaries, thesauruses, magazines laid sideways.

I drop to the floorboards and look under the bed.

No box.

There's just a framed photo. It's my dad and me in front of an empty lion exhibit. Every time we went to the zoo the lions were never out, just the big rocks and the water misters. Dad developed a theory that they didn't exist, that the zoo had decided to get the foot-traffic without the cost. "Time to visit the big attraction? Ready for the big rocks?" my dad would ask, and we stopped by every time we went. Mom took so many photos back then, and dad and I both hated it usually. But we're both smiling hugely here with our arms out like we're excited out of our minds over rocks.

He is wrong about what other people want. Andrea would want the letters. I'm sure she would think it's such a gift. Otherwise, you just have to play "What're they thinking?" forever.

When I lay back down to sleep, I look at the ink stains on my dad's sheet covers, soaked into the duvet fibers in little blue-black circles near my head. I keep picturing my dad's face again when I asked him, "Wouldn't you want to know if someone loved you that much?"

***

In the morning, my father taps twice on my door and asks me if I'd like to walk with him. "I know your flight is at two. We could eat lunch in the park? Get you fed before you go."

We bring Miss Simms' pasta and coffee in tumblers, which are really the only kitchenware he has in excess. Most of his utensils are pre-wrapped plastics.

We used to walk together like this on the weekends in San Diego too. Sometimes with Mom, but often without. It was one of the only things we did just the two of us.

We sit down under an elm I like. It's tall and full and it's shady enough. We eat Miss Simms' pasta out of Tupperware with plastic forks.

"Miss Simms makes good pasta," I say with my mouth full.

My dad grunts back.

"She *was* crazy," I say. "But—it's interesting. Do you think your mom would've come back as a squirrel?" I ask.

"I don't know." He's silent for a long time. Taxis honk loudly.

"You were right. I didn't really know my mother that well," he says. "I suppose maybe I thought I did when I was younger. She traveled a lot."

He looks at me. "One thing I do know is that my mom was a private person. I was upset when she told me not to visit her near the end, but she didn't want me to see her so differently,

so— without the usual faculties, and so I didn't. And that was difficult but— it was what it was. I know you're still upset about the things we found yesterday, but— that's what I have to say."

I don't feel like he's lying, but I don't know that the Marianne who wrote those letters really never wanted them seen. She definitely wrote like she wanted Andrea to know everything. Or maybe dad's right and she wanted them hidden? Can you want someone to know everything and so little about you at the same time? Which impulse was stronger? Which are you supposed to honor?

"What are you thinking?" my dad asks.

"Just about grandma," I say.

He nods. "So, your mom's picking you up at the airport? How is she?"

"She's good," I say, "Really good. Busy."

"And still with— uh Ian?"

"Yeah." They've been dating two years now. I feel bad telling my dad that. My mom is really pretty. And she's always laughing or smiling about something.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I ask and take another bite of pasta.

"Not for a while. Work keeps me busy." Wind ruffles the leaves.

"I think I'd want to be a tree," I say.

"What?"

"A tree. Or some kind of plant if I were going to come back as something."

"You don't think that would be boring?"

"No." I pause. "Plants are more interesting than people think. They can learn, and they use over 3,000 chemical signals to talk to each other. That's more than a lot of people have in their vocabularies. They just move too slowly for people to appreciate how smart they are."

"Is that right?'

"Yeah." I pat the trunk of the elm. "This guy could be saying all kinds of things right now."

He laughs. "My daughter's smart," Dad says, though not to me. He's looking at an ant shouldering a crumb of garlic bread. "I think it's good you're directing your curiosity to something other than people. They're a difficult beat."

I nod.

"I don't know if I'd want to come back as another person either. Hmm. A beaver," he says. "They're good builders."

I can add it to the list.

"You still really want to work in your next life?" I ask.

He laughs, and I love the sound. It makes me laugh too. "I think I do," he says.

When we start to pack away our dinner, close the Tupperware, collect the napkins, there's a rustling in the top branches of the elm. It's too dense to see, but we both look up and try to peer through. Without even thinking about it, I've started to guess: a hawk, pigeons, a possum, a sparrow, or her—that squirrel, anyway.

"Something's really moving up there," Dad says. He stands up and starts to walk away.

But I stay sitting because I'd really like to know. The tree is too tall to climb, so I just sit and wish that it decides to crane its head out. I see a flash of something that looks like fur.

"Addison?" My dad is looking back and down at me.

I look up again at the tree, and the leaves shiver close together, blocking everything.

But I get up and leave it, even though it bothers me. I know it still could be anything at all.

***

At the airport, my dad waits for me to check my bag. “Do you know your Gate?”

“Yes,” I say. “A12.”

“Okay,” he says, “Well, be safe. Text me when you get there.”

When I hug my dad goodbye, he squeezes me a lot more tightly than he normally does. It’s hard to breathe, but it’s a nice feeling. He hugs me a bit longer than normal too, and my eyes start to well. I concentrate on the sliding doors we just came through over the top of his shoulder.

He picks up Marianne’s orchid and hands it to me. I start to walk to security, and I know that he’ll wait for me to get through before he goes—like he always has.

I turn to say, “I love you a lot,” because whoever he is, however much he lets me know him, I do.

I Know You

In the Bosch house at Bradley-Manor Longwood, there is an eight-year-old girl named Edith who is determined to be kissed.

By seven p.m., when the Bosch's twenty-two-year-old nanny Alison arrives, the champagne is already sweating in large silver buckets, the oysters already clattering on mirrored serving trays. Alison pants as she walks toward the circular brick driveway. She has parked her 2003 Honda as far down from the columned entrance as possible.

The Bosch's money is old, made in steel in the 19th century by the ambitious immigrant Walter Bosch, and it's still growing. Like most things in Maryland and D.C., the Bosch house was built to look older than it is, but it's old enough to fascinate Alison, who was raised in New Jersey. She took the job as Edith's nanny nearly four years ago, shortly after she started at Georgetown, but she still feels small and awed around these people and their money.

She catches her breath at the door for a moment before she knocks.

"It's a disaster," Mrs. Bosch says as she opens the door, splaying her hand above her eyebrow like an old movie star.

"The catering won't be here until 9 p.m.," she says. "All we have are the oysters. Oh, and champagne."

Alison tells her this sounds like a dangerously good time. Mrs. Bosch laughs, a booming laugh for a woman, and ushers Alison inside.

"Thanks for coming in tonight. I really appreciate it, and I know Edie is thrilled," Mrs. Bosch says, her bracelets clinking softly as she gestures to the second floor. Alison actually likes Mrs. Bosch; she is sarcastic, always has free skin-care samples, and, at only forty-six, is the youngest partner for the biggest family law firm in D.C.

And Mrs. Bosch is a presence tonight, dressed in a fit-to-form black suit and a scintillating tiara with little jiggling stars and the words: “Happy New Year.”

“Alison! Alison! Alison!” Edith calls from the curled railing above and runs down the wooden steps.

“I have something to tell you.” Her green eyes bulge like a frog’s as she tugs Alison’s sleeve. She puts her mouth a half inch from Alison’s ear and whispers through her fingers so softly that Alison only hears the small pop of the t’s.

“What?” Alison asks.

“I’m going to kiss Daniel tonight,” Edith whispers louder.

“Oh wow, *really*?” Alison says gravely while Edith giggles into her hand.

Edith is a child who is proud to eat braised salmon at her parents’ dinner table and prefers to be called Edith and not Edie. Alison loves her a lot, though she knows it’s unprofessional. At the Bosch’s last holiday party, Edith had demanded the attention of everyone to sing Nat King Cole’s “L-O-V-E” after she practiced it with Alison, pointing to her and bouncing her whole body back and forth: “Love is all that I can give to you. Love is more than just a game for twoo!” Everyone in the room smiled until their cheeks hurt—at someone so small brazenly demanding so much attention.

Now the two debrief in Edith’s room.

Samantha Rabinowitz kissed Andrew Mellon on the tennis court after school, and she was telling everyone about it. “She said his lips tasted like orange Gatorade. *Ew.* That’s the worst flavor,” Edith says.

Edith is not one to be behind on anything; tonight, she will kiss Daniel.

“People kiss on New Year’s,” Edith says knowingly. “It’ll be better than a tennis court.”

Edith tells her Daniel is cute, a curly-haired blond with eyes she is fairly sure are green. Scale of one to ten? “Eleven. No eleven and a half,” Edith responds after a deliberative pause. Cute and an older boy: 6th grade. He is trustworthy: a family friend with whom she had gone on family ski trips. But, most importantly, he is dreamy. He played Peter Pan in the sixth-grade holiday play, and he was “*really* cute” as the leader of the Lost Boys, fighting pirates to rescue Wendy from the plank, making little “Yah. Yah!” noises while he swung the glinting stage sword.

Alison understands Edith’s feelings. Alison is an only child and had a lot of time to herself as a kid, which she spent watching movies. Both of Alison’s parents worked terribly hard—mom as a high school government teacher and her father as a pilot in the Airforce, based out of McGuire. If Alison ever felt lonely, she’d sit a foot away from their box TV and drink in the frames of *Sleeping Beauty*. She loved to watch Aurora waltz with Prince Phillip in the forest, all the colors so light they looked like they were painted with melted popsicle juice.

Aurora begins singing alone. She meets a stranger. Then they dance. The bare feet on the chilled grass; the way the light reached shyly around the trees; how Aurora spun, when he twirled her, like a dandelion seed on warm wind; the full whine of strings while they walked to a low bough; the way he sang, “I know you, I walked with you once”: Alison thought this was what should be expected of love. By some magic, by the end of the song, the two aren’t strange to each other anymore. Alison could not watch the VCR without feeling the rumblings of a large, growly ache for someone to know her like that—so easily.

She misses how it felt to go to sleep and think of the future, not as a to-do list but a someday. None of the fantasies Alison thinks up before bed now involve any dancing at all.

“Am I pretty?” Edith asks, looking at herself in the mirror. Edith has an open face, her mother’s proud nose—one she has not grown into just yet—and braces with pink rubber bands. She has decided to wear a ruby red dress with puffy sleeves and rhinestones at the collar.

Please don’t start asking those questions, Alison thinks. But she says, “You are such a pretty girl.”

They both look at themselves for a bit, almost ready to go down.

“Why do you do that with your face?” Edith asks.

“What?”

Edith draws her lips together, squeezes her cheeks in. She looks ridiculous.

Alison laughs, “I don’t make that face.” But when she looks at herself in the mirror again she notices: she subtly shifts the architecture of her face into a slight pout that makes her nose look smaller, her eyes and lips larger.

Alison is frightened more than she’d like to be. She doesn’t like that she can’t look at her own face without presenting it—trying to calculate how effectively it would charm someone else. She wants to know when started to look at herself like that. But she doesn’t know how to figure something like that out.

The central living room and kitchen are warm with people by the time they come down. The men are smartly dressed, the wrists of all the women heavily perfumed.

“Uncle Jaimie!” Edith runs immediately to a large, older man and hugs him earnestly, but her head reaches awkwardly—too close to his crotch.

“Edith. Edith! What are you doing?” Mrs. Bosch says, and Edith backs away confused.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Bosch tells Uncle Jamie, who just laughs a bit and returns to his conversation with a man in a pink sports coat.

Edith's "What did I do?" goes ignored.

"That man Jaimie is talking to," Mrs. Bosch says so only Alison can hear, "is an old client: Leonard Mellon. He once spent 60,000 on a credit card for one weekend in Cuba, mostly on women and cigars."

Alison raises her eyebrows.

"And he won full custody," Mrs. Bosch finishes.

"Was the mom that bad?" Alison asks.

"She was having an affair with her son's second-grade teacher and his wife. Also, I'm very good."

Alison breathes out loudly. She imbibes Mrs. Bosch's stories gleefully, though they always leave her with a bad aftertaste.

"Which of these children," Mrs. Bosch eeny, meeny, miny, mows around the room with her finger, "is going to screw up their kid the least?" Mrs. Bosch lifts an oyster from the tray. "That's family law. Think about that before you decide." She slurps it, her tiara sliding precariously, and walks toward a large group of women holding their champagne glasses in claw grips by the fireplace.

Alison did better than decently on her LSAT, and law school isn't only her mom's plan for her anymore. When she was little, Alison told her mother she'd be a veterinarian. Now that she'd grown up, she discovered she liked to argue and was afraid of blood.

"Hello, sweet Edie-pie," Mr. Bosch— a muscular, bald man in a gray Ralph Lauren half-zip—bends to hug his daughter, holding a bottle of champagne by the neck in one hand. "Well, you look just beautiful," he says as he rocks her a bit from side to side before standing. Mr. Bosch is around Alison's father's age, a C-Suite executive at a PR firm, and he spends most of

his time on the phone. When he isn't, he possesses a near gravitational charm that Alison assumes must be part of his family inheritance.

"Tell whoever we're borrowing you from tonight that we're very grateful," Mr. Bosch says to Alison.

"I will," she smiles and tries not to think too much of Richard, her boyfriend, who has his own plans tonight with his colleagues.

Richard is a speechwriter for a James Newsom's Virginia senate campaign. Congressman Newsom goes by "Jimmy"; he is a telegenic, young, and white but promises—convincingly too— to fight for everyone. Things are busy for Richard, who was not upset in the least when Alison told him she had to work and couldn't be with him for the holiday. When they started dating, Richard told her all the time that he hated being without her. Whenever he called her from whatever town Newsom was stumping in to say, "I miss you, Ali," Alison always felt better. She liked to hear that it hurt him a bit when she wasn't there.

She wonders what he's doing, and there's a twist in her stomach, one she's found she's completely helpless to, at the thought he occupies her mind more than she does his.

"*Please*, can I try some champagne?" Edith asks.

Mr. Bosch raises his eyebrows toward Alison and then looks back to Edie. He makes a deliberative whistling sound with his mouth: "I'll give you half a glass to try."

Alison hasn't figured out how to feel about Mr. Bosch—or the three-hundred-dollar bottle of wine he gave her a few months ago. Alison needed to leave a bit early to make her roommate's twenty-first birthday dinner at a place near Dupont that Alison had saved up to enjoy. Before she did, Mr. Bosch insisted she follow him to the wine cellar, which was cave-like: cool and dark. He ran his eyes over his collection and crouched down to pull a bottle from the

bottom corner. “21 years for 21 years,” he said, and tried to hand her a bottle with a creamy black label. She couldn’t accept, really, she couldn’t accept; she told him this repeatedly, and then, “I know nothing about wine. This is too expensive.”

“No look, Alison—” He flexed his right hand to emphasize his words. “No one should drink poor wine on their birthday. It’s a crime in D.C., actually.”

Alison laughed a little longer than it merited and noticed herself doing so.

“This is what we’ll do,” Mr. Bosch clapped his hands together once. “I’m going to give you a primer.” He turned around and stretched to pick another bottle from higher up, a red. He started to wind a wine opener into the cork.

“Lesson one. People who use electric wine openers don’t deserve to wine. You’ve got to work for it.” he said.

Alison laughed again.

Mr. Bosch twisted the cork so quickly his hand appeared to blur.

Alison turned to look instead at the wine in the dark wood racks, which shifted from whites to reds as she scanned. The thermostat by the glass door read 55. Her arms were cold, but she didn’t want to move to rub them. Every one of her movements felt slower and more awkward than normal. The air was as humid and heavy as it was around the Georgetown pool.

The cork popped, and Mr. Bosch poured Alison a bit in a glass and told her what it was as he did: a cabernet sauvignon, which he referred to as cab thereafter. He told her the cab was old, elegant, and then something about its tannic structure Alison couldn’t follow. But Mr. Bosch was a good salesman, passionate and sure of himself. He told her to try some and that she was meant to let the wine puddle on her tongue for a second before she swallowed. Alison sipped it while he watched, and she told him it was delicious.

It was good. Better than any wine she remembered having. Mr. Bosch balanced the 21-year-old wine between his hands again and proffered it to her, “Please take it. For me?” he asked. When she did, he smiled at her in a way that reminded her of a little boy. She thought for a second he might say, “You’re it.”

Now, Edith sips, holding the flute in both hands. Her lips tighten and eyebrows scrunch. “Delicious,” she says, her too-big nose and little face held high.

“Oh, there he is.” Edith spots Daniel bundled in a mom-chosen ensemble. He looks like a stretched cherub. He has a friend with him, a shorter boy in a Boy Scout uniform with a cloud-shaped birthmark under his left eye. They are pouring small mountains of hot sauce on oysters, laughing. They laugh in a slightly breathier, more controlled way than Edith, who still burbles and squeals.

“He’s so cute, he’s so cute, he’s so cute,” Edith whispers under her breath before making the executive decision that she and Alison need to plan her kiss more.

They go to the old, arched bridge over the small creek in the Bosch’s backyard, taking Edith’s crystal-spangled Holiday Barbie and a Ken Doll with them under cover of their coats. Edith didn’t always admit that she still liked playing with dolls, but Alison knew she did. Alison sometimes asked, when they had nothing to do, “Do you want to play with your Barbies?” And Edith would respond, “If you want to...then sure!” The Holiday Barbie is Edith’s favorite.

They sit by the bank of the small stream just in front of the wooden bridge, lit by their phone lights. Alison had always enjoyed bridges when she was a child; they just had a different flavor than other places, seemed sinister and magical.

“Okay, so you- you’re Daniel,” Edith directs. “And I’m me.”

Then Edith pauses.

The water gurgles over the rocks. A dragonfly hums in Alison's left ear.

"Okay, so how do you start a kiss? How have you done it?"

"Umm-, well, I guess I'd usually get the boy I like alone. And then I'd just look at him like I want to be kissed." Alison wants to rescind the advice immediately. *It is down-right unfeminist*, she berates herself.

"How do you look like you want to be kissed?"

This one is difficult for her.

"I think if you like him enough, he'll see it," Alison says, even though she doesn't know how men have picked out signs in her face. She always had trouble looking at the men she really liked. If she made eye-contact too long, Alison felt increasingly exposed, porous even. She felt sure their eyes would pierce. They'd see how much Alison wanted them. And Alison didn't like all her wants spilling out like that—into other people's hands.

"Oh, okay. But what if he doesn't get the hint? Can I tell him? Or just kiss him?"

"Of *course*." Alison has never once kissed someone first, and she's awed by Edith's bravery. She hopes Edith does make the first move.

They sit for a while, acting the scene out in different ways. The Barbies shake their plastic hands. Barbie Edith asks Barbie Daniel to talk. The Barbies walk over and sit on a smooth stone and talk about the pancake Fridays in the lunchroom. Alison whispers a countdown to midnight, and Barbie Edith waits for the one. "Mmwah!" Edith says as she bops Barbie Edith's mouth on Barbie Daniel's.

"Where do I put my tongue?"

"I'd keep it in your mouth."

"Where will he put his tongue?"

"He should keep it inside his as well." Alison is shocked by how strongly and suddenly she feels protective. It's exactly as she feels every time some song about sex comes on the radio when Edith is in the car. Edith will sing anything, not knowing what it means. Alison is fast with the radio dial.

"What do you say afterward?"

Alison wishes she knew. She'd known some boys who laughed softly, some who'd simply been silent for a time before speaking again like nothing had happened at all.

"You can just smile if you want. Or say, 'Happy New Year.'"

Edith is pleased with the last suggestion. Edith's phone light under her chin casts shadows. "Happy New Year, Daniel," she says in a monster-voice.

"Oh, you'll have him hooked," Alison laughs.

"Happily, happily. Ever, ever." Edith claps.

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The caterers never came.

When Alison and Edith return the room is bathed in ecstatic noise: clanging laughs and clusters of conversations that goad each other louder. In the corner, a larger woman in a purple top hat jumps on a man's back. By the kitchen, men huddle around the expansive marble table-top singing, loudly and wildly off-key, the words to a Grateful Dead song.

"You swim at Ridglea every morning at seven? It's amazing I've never seen you there. I would have noticed you," Alison hears a tan man in round glasses tell Mrs. Bosch, as she and Edith stop by the fireplace, a few feet away from Daniel and his friend. Edith nervously asks for the time and Alison mouths, "One minute."

A woman in a long, silky black dress turns the TV to max volume, and Ryan Seacrest points to the Times Square Ball. The woman turns to face the TV, and her date puts an arm around her bare waist. The back of her dress is open at the spine and the straps are small enough that it looks like the whole thing could fall to her feet in one pile of waves if her date breathed too generously on her shoulders.

Alison wonders if Richard is watching Seacrest in whatever bar he's in and hopes he is singing badly with the rest of the boys. This is the first New Year's kiss they'll miss in four years.

Edith fluffs her skirt, and it skims Alison's leg. Alison gives Edith a little nod and a thumbs up. Edith walks a few steps, stops behind Daniel, and taps him on the shoulder. As he turns around, Edith says, all confidence, almost in a stage-voice, "Daniel, you were really good in the Peter Pan play."

"Oh, thanks. Did you see it the night I accidentally hit Matt Sellers in the nose with the stage sword.? His nose just freakin' snapped and then it was like…whooosh." Daniel mimes the blood gushing from Matt Sellers' nose.

"Really? Cool," Edith says. "I didn't see it that night."

Daniel talks to his Boy Scout friend while the adults start to count down.

Eight. Seven. Six.

"I wish I did though," Edith says.

Daniel nods and starts shouting the numbers, "Five, four, three!"

"Do you want to kiss me?" Edith asks.

It takes Daniel a second: "Two! One!" Then he looks at Edith standing there with her hands at her side, her rhinestone collar glittering.

"HONK!" Daniel blows a party horn in her face.

Then he runs away with the Boy Scout, his nice leather boots clomping on the hardwood as they make their way out of the living room, where some of that delicate buoyancy has deflated. Everyone else seems to have kissed who they were meant to kiss. Even Mr. Bosch is standing by Mrs. Bosch now, hugging her to him

When Alison looks back, Edith is red-faced and shaking slightly.

Edith sniffs as they walk upstairs, tears rolling lazily over the rounds of her face—her cheeks, her squished chin.

When the door closes, Edith cries freely, and Alison hugs her tightly and runs her fingers over Edith's quivering head. Edith says, "I'm stupid." Alison has never seen her like this: "No he's stupid. All the boys his age are stupid and selfish. You'll find someone better." Edith cries again, "But I wanted him to like me."

"It's okay, it's okay," Alison says.

When Edith finally calms and readies herself for bed, she discovers her Holiday Barbie is missing. Calls of "I left it!" Tears again. Alison tucks Edith in and promises she'll find it.

She exits the roar of the Bosch's and is jarred by the silence of the backyard. The trees are leafless, so there are no shushes or rustles. The moon is full and heavy.

There are distant shouts from the stream where she and Edith were.

When Alison shuffles through the leaves, down the small hill, she sees Daniel standing on the bridge, both hands shaped into a gun, spitting, "Die. Pew, pew! Bitch, come over here and die," at the Boy Scout standing below him, reaching toward something dangling from the center of the bridge — Edith's doll. But the doll is naked now. It swings half a foot above the water from green twine knotted around one foot.

"What the hell?" Alison yells. "That's Edith's!"

Both boys straighten and look at her with their mouths a bit open. Daniel stares, then sprints away.

The Boy Scout watches his friend leave, tries to look back at Alison, but can't look at her face. "I'm sorry," he tells a pile of rocks that clinks and topples when he nudges them.

"Are you going to tell?" he asks.

Alison sighs. "I don't think I need to."

"Oh," he mumbles, "Okay. Thank you." The Boy Scout silently takes his pocket-knife out to cut the doll down.

As she watches, Alison realizes the whole thing looks like the scenes in *Spiderman* where Mary Jane screams as she hangs from cables and webs like a terrified, blonde ornament. This little boy must watch movies, and when he watches them maybe he thinks he's supposed to be a hero.

The Boy Scout squelches around the bank to find the doll's dress with his flashlight. He hands it back to her by his fingertips because it is caked in mud. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really am sorry," he says without breathing between the words. He looks so frightened of her that Alison feels much older than she's ever felt. "It's okay," she says because she feels she can't just tell this boy with his cloud birthmark that it isn't okay; he's trying to be chivalrous.

"Thank you," he breathes. He runs to hug Alison, and he wraps his arms tightly around her back. She thinks he still hugs like a little boy, even though his head is tall enough that it reaches her chest. His khaki shirt smells like smoke and dirt. Alison pats his back twice, and the boy lets her go to run back to the Bosch's.

Alison washes the dress in the water and clothes the doll alone. The dress still glitters, and the doll smiles gamely. Alison has to press her nail into the meat of her thumb to keep from crying.

She can't help but think of Richard now, about her first time with him.

Richard was a senior and her op-ed editor at the Georgetown paper. He was and remains idealistic, sure all problems are fixable. He spoke passionately about his politics, and he moved her to the left of where she was.

His edits were incisive; he'd say things like "cut this," "dig here." He undangled her modifiers, tightened her structure. She fumbled around what she wanted to say more than he did. She used to like just watching his mouth move.

On the first night they slept together she'd felt especially frustrated with a column. "I don't know what you're trying to get across," he said to her. After so many hours rewriting, Alison felt close to tears; she felt so unequal to the task of making people understand her—of making him especially. Richard reached over and put one of his hands on her leg and stroked it with his thumb. It was the first time he touched her, and Alison almost laughed aloud. It felt like such a relief, such a pleasure, to be so suddenly aware of her whole body at once, to feel the heat of his hand in her elbows and her earlobes at the same time.

She thought maybe this was the first sign of love.

On his bed later that night first night, she'd felt unsure of how far she wanted to go. She'd spent her high school years focused on school. She hadn't had sex before.

Richard laid his forehead on her shoulder, sighed in her ear, "You're killing me."

She thought*, Isn't that wonderful?* Then, *Why do I think that's wonderful?*

But by that time, her whole body had curled around him.

Afterward, Alison watched Richard watch his ceiling fan, amazed by how strange he still was to her even after all that, her ankle still resting on his calf.

When he asked her what she was thinking she said, "Nothing."

And when she walked back to her apartment the next day, she squeezed her arms around her middle, half-expecting to feel barbs under her skin. She didn't know how much of last night was about wanting to be close to someone and how much of it was something else—something with some selfishness to it, something embarrassing in its intensity.

She has trouble sorting out even now what the Boy Scout did, where one thing ended and another began.

There's a ringing sound.

It's Richard calling to say, "Happy New Year." His voice sounds far away and happy. His words are a bit lazy, his s's drawn out a bit too far. Richard tells her about his night, that he and the strategists are having a lovely time at the Marriot bar.

"Did you get a midnight kiss?" he asks, and Alison can tell he's joking. As if she couldn't if she wanted to.

Mr. Bosch's comes to her mind along with the plinking sound his wine makes when she opens her apartment fridge; she hadn't known what to do with the bottle. Alison imagines his face close her hers, wonders if his hands would make her feel the way Richard's did. She feels guilty immediately.

"You're quiet tonight. Something wrong?" he asks.

Alison wishes she were near Richard now to have him hug her and listen to him say, "It'll be okay." He was one of those men who could say it so believably.

"The little girl that I babysit. She wanted to have her first kiss tonight and she didn't get it," Alison says. She doesn't know how to quite get it across.

"Oh no," Richard says. "Tough break."

"Tough break," Alison repeats, thinking of Edith, who was probably still crying upstairs, waiting for someone to come in and care about it all as much as she did.

"I've got to go."

"Well, Happy New Year," Richard says. "I love you."

"I love you."

When she hangs up the phone the silence wraps around her, and she is still holding the smiling doll in her glittery dress.

She looks up and imagines a man walking out from behind the tree beside her. He doesn't make much noise when he walks, and she knows his face is kind even though it's dark. She pictured it just like this when she was little too. Sometimes in the summers when she lay by her back door and savored Nilla Wafers, she'd imagine him emerging at once from the sprinklers, a tall man offering his hand just for her. Then the man takes her wrist lightly, helps her to her feet. He pushes her hair behind her ears, says softly, "I know you. I walked with you once."

But no man would ever come when she was alone and voice her dreams back to her, exactly as she had said them. And if there was such a man, Alison thought, she wouldn't deserve him.

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Upstairs, Edith smiles, braces gleaming, when Alison hands her doll back to her.

In a bed too large for her, with a little dome on her bedside casting purple stars on the ceiling, Edith looks every bit the little girl she is.

"Where'd you find it?" Edith asks, and Alison wishes she had those eyes.

"Right where you left it."

Fragile Things Outside the Treehouse

At thirty, Ana Pinch took her best socks, a bottle of tequila, and a *New York Times* crossword book and returned to her childhood tree house. She was hiding from her mother, Sarah Pinch, who was unwell.

Two weeks before, when Sarah called to tell Ana that the doctors found a tumor in her abdomen, Ana was about to board a flight for Paris. She was an international flight attendant who mostly flew to Europe and was based in Philadelphia, a three-hour flight from her mother. Ana said, "Mom, it will be okay. It will be okay." Though Ana normally only got back home three to four times a year, she was closest, of anyone in the world, to her mother.

When Ana first got to the hospital, there was a constant stream of tests and many needles. Every time a nurse came in to give Sarah intravenous fluids or do a blood draw, Ana squeezed one of her mother's hands. They were as cool and beautiful as they'd been when Ana was a girl. Sarah had long fingers, nails as strong and pink as shells. She'd even once been a hand model for a jewelry store print-ad. Ana thought those hands couldn't go anywhere

The Pinch women had long been a family of two. Ana's father left in the early '90s when his restaurant was belly-up and gasping. He promised he would fly in soon, but Ana didn't expect him. She saw him infrequently, though he always sent Ana girlish cards on her birthday, with roses or butterflies with small rhinestones. Ana hated and feared how much she'd inherited from him. She had her father's nails, which cracked and peeled around the beds even when Ana didn't bite them—which she'd done since seven.

When the doctor, who had trouble with eye-contact, said it was advanced pancreatic cancer and that Sarah had an estimated three to five months, Ana felt it was so indecent for him to say so that she almost plugged her ears and sang, "la, la, la."

It's something she'd done before—only half-jokingly—when the crew on a Paris layover started counting down the days to departure. Ana didn't like to break her "Paris Rule," which was as close to a credo as she had. It was this: The best way to enjoy Paris is to never admit you're leaving it. In Ana's experience, the cab ride in and the first night were magic, always. The city was a splurge of lights. But the feeling was fragile, and there were just certain things you didn't say, certain things that must be avoided, to keep it.

Without realizing, Ana had applied a version of the "Paris Rule" to her mother since she was young. It was this: The best way to enjoy loving Sarah Pinch is to never admit she has any pain you can't help. As soon as Ana became old enough to really notice times Sarah seemed sad, Ana never dealt with it directly. Instead, she'd tell any ridiculous story and say anything to make her mother feel better: the tree in the front yard looks beautiful, you look beautiful, this grilled cheese is the best thing I've ever had, I love you, I love you.

So, after the doctor told them, Ana said, automatically, "It will be okay." Sarah said she wanted out of the hospital. She wanted home. And the doctor did let Sarah go. He told her to think over the few options he presented where she'd be more comfortable

But Ana didn't find home—a cream-colored two-bedroom—more comfortable at all. It was disconcerting to see her mother back around their toaster, their blue couch, but to have it be so different than all the other times Ana had seen her around those things. As the day progressed, Ana began to feel something like motion sickness.

As a flight attendant Ana was excited by flux, but, at her home, things were supposed to be fixed. Ana was supposed to able to count on things like the sound of her mother's heels on the hardwood floors in the mornings and late afternoons—as she went and returned from her administrative job. And, most importantly, everything about the way the Pinch women watched

movies was meant to be predictable. They watched them on weekends and holidays. Sarah ate her popcorn with melted mozzarella. Her mother had specific tenacious opinions about almost every movie star: on Angelina Jolie it was "stunning but a little...well I don't like to call other women loose but..."; on Natalie Portman it was "I just adore her"; on Colin Firth, about whom Sarah Pinch blushed, it was "He's just got a tenderness about him." And Ana loved watching her mother watch movies because Sarah always looked so happy doing it.

But that night, when Ana and Sarah sat down to watch *The Princess Bride*— a shared favorite—Ana gave her mom her popcorn as she liked it, and Sarah was too nauseous to eat. Later, when Ana looked over to see her mother's face at the moment Wesley and Buttercup reunite, Sarah was crying. Ana asked her mother how she was feeling.

"I wish I had time to meet a good pirate or watch you meet one," Sarah said, smiling a bit and wiping her face. "I hate to miss—" And Ana stopped her to say that she did have time, time enough, at least, "to meet one of the bad ones. The good ones are hiding." But after her mother laughed, Ana watched the sadness re-settle itself in her mom's face, circling and laying down where it was comfortable.

At the end of the movie, Ana looked over at her mother and found Sarah asleep—so deeply asleep that Ana could really look at her; Sarah's knees were curled tightly into her stomach, and she looked a bit sunk, in the face and even in her hands, which had a blueish hue they hadn't had before. Ana watched her mother's violet cotton shirt lift and lower quietly. She had to watch for breathing now.

How much do I love this person? she asked herself.

A lot. The love had a large weight, and it had rooted itself everywhere—in her chest, her jaw, her shoulders. Ana had never asked the question like that before.

How much do I owe this person?

Too much. Everything. Ana felt unequal to it.

She couldn't sit in the feeling anymore. She needed out. Ana grabbed her tequila, socks, and crosswords and scrawled a quick note to her mother: "Be back. On errands." She decided to climb up to sleep in her treehouse, which had always been a haven for her since her mother had it built.

But Ana told herself, as she sent up her things to the treehouse-window in a pink bucket on a pulley, that it would just be one night.

Though Ana had to crouch her head to get in, the treehouse still looked much the same as it always had. It had just the one window with scallop-edged shutters that moonlight lazed through. The wooden floorboards gave more than they used to as Ana crawled toward the tree trunk, which took up the center of the house and split the floor. The crayons she'd stored in its bark grooves at nine-years-old were still there. On the left wall, Ana saw the pictures of Leonardo Di Caprio from his *Romeo and Juliet* era that she'd hung at thirteen. Sarah had contributed some of them; she tore them from an *Us Weekly* for Ana. Ana reached out the window to grab her things from the bucket and then leaned against the trunk and took a warming pull of tequila. Though her toes stretched almost out of the treehouse, into the spaces between the boards on the wall, Ana still felt that she could exhale here—as easily as she could at nine when she had bangs and the red View-master or at thirteen when she wore that horrible eggplant eyeliner.

Ana closed her eyes and thought about the only other time she'd gone up to sleep in the treehouse before all this, when she was seven and properly afraid.

During an ordinary recess, Matthew had broken Caleb's pinkie. Matthew and Caleb were two boys in Ana's class who had been fencing with large sticks. When Caleb knocked Matthew's out of his hand, Matthew got a grip on Caleb's pinkie, and told him, "Give it back or I'll break it." Caleb laughed because he had heard that one before, and then Matthew really broke it.

Ana was on the swings when she heard a queer little snap and Caleb's wail. Balls stopped bouncing. Kids swarmed. But even when the teacher pushed all of them back, Ana was close enough that she could see the pinkie perfectly—hanging limp and worm-like from Caleb's right hand. Matthew implored, grubbed their second-grade teacher's dress with his hands. "I didn't think it would be that easy," he said.

After the boys were sent home, the day was supposed to go on—to division, the water-cycle—but the class was restless and excited about the break. The teacher sat them down to tell them the lesson: "Be careful with each other. Hm? Don't roughhouse so rough. Your pinkies are as easy to break as baby carrots. I mean it. If you tried to bite into your pinkie it'd be as easy to snap as a carrot."

So that night, when Ana couldn't sleep, she went up to her treehouse, thinking over and over about baby carrots, Caleb's wail, and the horrible slackness of that pinkie. She kept her hands balled, worried about each of her fingers, not trusting them around anything. She cried so loudly Sarah heard her from inside and climbed up to her to ask what was wrong. Ana held her mother's gorgeous hand and told her what happened.

"If a boy tries to break your pinkie I'll eat his hand," Sarah said. "His *whole* hand."

Ana shook her head and said, "No you won't." Sarah said, "I will, I love carrots," and pulled Ana's hand up and pretended she would eat it, baring and chomping her teeth a few inches from Ana's pointer finger.

Sarah made Ana's throat shake with laughter. And Ana hugged her mother closer, less afraid.

Two decades later, Ana still felt safer when she thought of it. So much safer that she finally went to sleep.

But when she dreamed, she dreamed herself back to the couch next to Sarah, where this time her mother woke as Ana looked at her. Sarah raised her soft, long hands to cradle Ana's cheek and said, "Oh, Ana. I'm so disappointed. The Paris Rule? For me? How am I supposed to forgive you?"

Ana's cheeks were slick with tears when the zipping whistles of a bird woke her. Ana was so grateful to be out of that dream that she craned her head out of her window to thank the bird. It was a warbler stretching his legs on the branch, and Ana thought he looked princely and proud, his face and stomach the color of a good summer lemon.

As she watched him for a few minutes, she saw that he'd taken up residence in a birdhouse that her mother put up years ago. Sarah Pinch was a lax Episcopalian and rarely woke up for mass, but she always believed in birds. She told Ana she thought that birds brought messages if you listened to them, on big things and the small things too. When Ana was little and had trouble waking up for school, Sarah came into Ana's room, opened her bedroom window so she could hear the birds, and said, "Time to get up." When Ana moaned "Why?" into her pillow, her mother said, "Because the birds say so."

Ana looked at her backdoor, which was ten feet from the treehouse. And, to the right of it, Sarah's bedroom window, which was close enough that Ana could hit it with a pebble if she wanted to.

Now was the time. Ana had promised herself that she'd go back in the morning. Instead, Ana crouched in the farthest corner from the treehouse window with her crosswords. She thought about a six-letter synonym for garbage: not trash, not waste. Litter was the right word-count, wrong letters. *Refuse.* For entire portions of the day, she could forget about her mother almost entirely.

Once, in the afternoon, when Ana heard Sarah open the back door, she pressed her back to the floor and breathed shallowly until the door closed a minute later. Even with her crosswords and the bird as analgesics, by the time she lay down to sleep the second night, Ana had bitten her nails to crescents of exposed nerves.

When Ana woke up after the next day, she'd slept later, steeping in the same horrible dream longer than she had before. She kneaded her cheeks to wake herself, called to the yellow warbler.

She found him supine on the ground under her window. His straight legs were bent now, in a spider-like plie.

"That's sad," Ana said. And then, "Thank you." And then, "I'm very sorry."

He'd made her morning sweeter, distracted her from herself. In return, Ana thought, she had given him nothing.

Around two hours later, Ana heard a sound like a water hose gurgling in the mud. She looked at the ground outside the window, and she saw, hunched over the warbler, a large bird with a pink head pressed deeply into its black shoulders.

The vulture dived, dived again, dived again, and Ana watched it pull long, wet strings from the unwrapped yellow bird.

"Go away," Ana said to the vulture and slammed her scalloped shutters.

But the vulture wasn't bothered. Ana could still hear the slosh and little metallic squeals.

She opened the window again, screamed loudly, "Go away!"

The vulture dived. Dived again.

Ana threw her book of crosswords at the vulture's back. It squawked and flapped angrily to the side, sat for a moment. But then it made its way back to the body, shoulders lifting and lowering almost like the masked villains crept on Saturday morning cartoons.

"I can't take you seriously," she said. But the vulture ate as if it was finding everything it'd been looking for in the warbler's belly.

It didn't seem at all fair to Ana, so she threw more—crayons, her balled socks, and finally the tequila. The bottle thumped inches from the vulture's head, and it looked up at Ana and waited, as if for her to address it again.

The vulture flew to Ana's window. As it sat on the sill, its wings jerked and splayed awkwardly before quieting at its shoulders. Its eyes were round, wet and seemed engaged in vacuous slurping, like cylindrical holes of mud. Its mouth was dinner-plate white. And Ana could see through its nose, which couldn't be described as anything other than scull-like—the basic structure rinsed of its meat.

It was the first thing that had felt so real to Ana in such a while. This felt urgent.

It delayed there. And then turned its back to her and jumped.

Outside the vulture flew. It circled the house that her mother was in. When Ana looked out the window she could see that its circles were slowly descending.

Then the bird dropped. It landed by the rosemary under her mother's window. It started its see-sawed walk toward it.

Ana had the sensation of having just stopped spinning. She tried to swallow, then tried to sigh, but the muscles of her throat wouldn't move the way she wanted them to.

Ana climbed down. She ran to her back door and into the kitchen. When she was in the kitchen, she took her mother's chef's knife. She ran to her mother's door, turned the handle she knew well. Her mother was sleeping, her sheets lifting and lowering. The vulture had just taken its seat on the ledge outside the squat, square window, but it was almost entirely hidden by a vase of white roses.

"She's mine," Ana said. "Please."

But it stretched its head through the green necks and the perfect flowers.

Ana knew suddenly that she would eat it whole. And she clutched the chef's knife as she walked toward it. She'd slice it clean at the neck: She'd grill it. Kabob it. Julienne its insides and serve them on cold lettuce. Macerate it with red wine and raspberries. Caramelize those horrible wet eyes. Make a stew of it with celery and carrots. She was frightened by how hungry she was.

"Go away!" This time she screamed.

It kept sitting. Ana waited for it to apologize or make the excuse that it just didn't realize what it was doing.

The vulture considered placidly. Then it turned around in one swift motion and left.

Her mother was sitting up in her bed. "Ana?" her mother asked though she could see it was. Ana went to her, and her mother raised her soft, cold hand to Ana's cheek. Ana had to pull her lips shut over her teeth because she was so afraid she might bite her mother's fingers.

"Oh Ana," her mother said, and Ana worried. But her mother just moved her thumb in small circles on Ana's face.

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